

The Blair Educational Amendment

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Ellet Joseph Waggoner

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On the 25th of May, 1888, Senator H. W. Blair, of New Hampshire, introduced into the Senate the following “joint resolution,” which was read twice and order to lie on the table:—*BEA 2.1*

“Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America (two-thirds of each House concurring therein), That the following amendment to the Constitution of the United States be, and hereby is, proposed to the States, to become valid when ratified by the Legislatures of three-fourths of the States, as provided in the Constitution:—BEA 2.2

ARTICLE

“SECTION 1. No State shall ever make or maintain any law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*BEA 2.3*

“SEC. 2. Each State in this Union shall establish and maintain a system of free public schools, adequate for the instruction of all the children living therein, between the ages of six and sixteen years inclusive, in the common branches of knowledge, and in virtue, morality, and the principles of the Christian religion. But no money raised by taxation imposed by law, or any money or other property or credit belonging to any municipal organization, or to any State, or to the United States, shall ever be appropriated, applied, or given to the use or purposes of any school, institution, corporation, or person, whereby instruction or training shall be given in the doctrines, tenets, belief, ceremonials, or observances peculiar to any sect, denomination, organization, or society, being, or claiming to be, religious in its character, or such peculiar doctrines, tenets, belief, ceremonial, or observances be taught or inculcated in the free public schools.*BEA 2.4*

“Sec: 3. To the end that each State, the United States, and all the people thereof, may have and preserve Governments republican in form, and in substance, the United States shall guarantee to every State, and to the people of every State, and of the United States, the support and maintenance of such a system of free public schools as is herein provided.*BEA 3.1*

“SEC. 4. That Congress shall enforce this article by legislation when necessary.”*BEA 3.2*

Before offering any comment on this, it may be well to note the opinion of two or three men who have made the United States Constitution a special study, as to the desirability of any change whatever in that document. In the New York *Independent* of January 10, 1889, the Hon. George Bancroft, the historian wrote thus:—*BEA 3.3*

“I have your letter asking what changes had better be made in the

Constitution. I know of none; if any change is needed, it is in ourselves, that we may more and more respect that body of primal law.”*BEA 3.4*

In the same paper Mr. Justice Blatchford, of the United States Supreme Court, wrote as follows:—*BEA 3.5*

“I am satisfied with the Constitution as it is. It cannot be bettered. Constitution tinkers are in a poor business. If there are ills, it is better to bear them than fly to others that we know not of.”*BEA 3.6*

And Justice Gray, of the United States Supreme Court, also said:—*BEA 3.7*

“I am so old-fashioned as to think that the Constitution, administered according to its letter and spirit, is well enough as it is. And I am of the opinion of the late Governor Andrew, that it is not desirable to Mexicanize our Government by proposing constitutional amendments as often as there is supposed to be a disturbance in its practical working.”*BEA 3.8*

Those honored gentlemen are not alone in thinking that the Constitution is good enough as it is. Indeed, it ought not to regulate a grant amount of legal knowledge to enable anyone to conclude that there cannot be any very serious defect in a Constitution under which this nation has grown to such magnitude, and has acquired such influence among the nations. The founders of this Government took special care to keep out of the Constitution any statement that would tend to legislate any form of religion. This they did by stipulating in the Constitution that “no religious test shall ever be recognized as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” And thus, to make assurance doubly sure, almost immediately after the adoption of the Constitution they added the first amendment, which says that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” It is not our purpose here to discuss the evils of religious legislation in general, but only briefly to show that Senator Blair’s proposed amendment is in direct conflict both with the sixth article of the Constitution and the first amendment, and also to note the necessary result of its adoption.*BEA 4.1*

It will be in order first to call attention to that which gives the proposed amendment all its point. It is this: "Each State in this Union shall establish and maintain a system of free public schools, adequate for the instruction of all the children living therein, ... in virtue, knowledge, and the principles of the Christian religion." With this clause omitted, there would be no reason for the amendment; for the free public-school system for the instruction of children in the common branches of knowledge is already as much a part of our Government as it could possibly be by a constitutional amendment.*BEA 4.2*

It needs no argument to show that this proposed amendment is in direct conflict with the Constitution as it now is, and that therefore before it could be of any effect the sixth article and the first amendment would have to be repealed. The Constitution declares that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," while this amendment calls for the establishment of the principles of the Christian religion. It says that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States," while the proposed amendment would require a belief in the principles of the Christian religion, as a necessary qualification of a teacher. Not only does it require a belief in the principles of the Christian religion, but it requires that each applicant for the position of teacher should stand an examination in those principles. Thus the proposed constitutional amendment is itself unconstitutional.*BEA 5.1*

The adoption of the amendment would be nothing more or less than a union of Church and State. Thus: The "principles of the Christian religion" are the foundation of the Christian church. The teaching of those principles is that for which the Christian church exists. Therefore to establish those principles, and to make them a part of the machinery of the Government, would be simply to establish the principles of the professed Christian church, and to make the State the partner and active agent of the church.*BEA 5.2*

Some apologists for the amendment have thought to evade this conclusion by saying that it does not require the States to maintain religion, but only to maintain schools adequate for the education of children in the principles of the Christian religion. This is the

thinnest kind of an evasion; for what would be the sense of maintaining schools adequate for the education of children in the principles of the Christian religion, if those principles were not taught? What is meant by “schools adequate for the education” of children in the principles of the Christian religion? Evidently, schools equipped with suitable text-books, and provided with teachers competent to give instruction in those principles. That would involve quite a change from our present school system, for our schools are not now capable of imparting such instruction. Now it is the height of folly to say that the Government would be at the expense of providing extra text-books and teachers, so as to make the schools adequate for the education of children in the principles of religion, and yet not require any such instruction to be given. The very fact that the State is required to establish and maintain a system of schools adequate for the education of children “in the common branches of knowledge, and in virtue, morality, and the principles of the Christian religion,” shows that they would be expected to teach those principles, just as much as the common branches of knowledge.*BEA 6.1*

The San Francisco *Chronicle* of December 27, 1888, stated this matter in very good style, as follows:—*BEA 7.1*

“Where an article of the organic law provides that a certain thing shall be taught in the common schools of every State in the Union, is it not a mere evasion to say that it is not an establishment of that particular thing by authority of law?*BEA 7.2*

“Suppose, for example, that the Constitution forbade the recognition by the State of the laws of mathematics. Would not an amendment which directed that the multiplication table be taught in every common school in the land, at the same time pledging the United States to the support and maintenance of such schools, be a repeal, or, at any rate, a palpable evasion of the prohibition against mathematics?*BEA 7.3*

“Without seeking to enter upon any polemical discussion, it is beyond controversy that the ‘principles of the Christian religion’ must involve the divinity of Christ; for, so far as the purely ethical doctrines are concerned, they are common, to a greater or less

degree, to all religions, and may, indeed, be found in certain philosophical systems which law no claim to being considered religions at all. Senator Blair, then, would have every common school in the United States teach children, between the ages of six and sixteen, that Christ was divine. But if this be done, how can the conclusion be avoided that the United States has adopted a State religion? and what becomes of the rights of those of her citizens who believe otherwise?*BEA 7.4*

“The question is a serious one, and it cannot be left for decision solely to those who already believe in the Christian religion. They have, under the law, every right to believe; but their neighbors, who may be fire-worshippers, or Mohammedans, or Agnostics, have, under the same law, an equal right to disbelieve; and the question is, whether it is consistent with the idea of a Government which has always disavowed any union between Church and State to insist that all the children of the nation shall be instructed in the principles of any religion, no matter what its intrinsic value or claim upon the world may be.”*BEA 7.5*

We think that every unprejudiced, thoughtful reader will answer at once, that it is not consistent. This must be apparent, no matter what the merit of the proposed amendment may be. If it is good, and ought to be adopted, then the Constitution as it now is is wrong, and the sixth article and the first amendment ought to be repealed. If those sections are good, and embody correct principles, then the proposed amendment is bad, and ought to be rejected. Let the intelligent citizen judge between them.*BEA 8.1*

The question now to be answered is, “Who shall decide upon the principles of the Christian religion which are to be taught if the amendment is adopted?” The Methodists would give one answer if it were left with them, the Baptists another, the Presbyterians another, and other denominations still another. All would differ, yet each would present something common to all. But the question is not to be left to any one denomination; for the latter part of the second section expressly stipulates that no public money shall ever be appropriated for the instruction of children in any of the tenets of doctrines peculiar to any sect. It is this part of the amendment, so wondrously worded, which catches the multitude, and blinds them

to the principle of Church and State union, which is involved. They think it will be so fine a thing to settle it forever that no public money shall be appropriated for the purpose of sectarian teaching, that they lose sight of the real gist of the thing. Protestants think that it would forever shut Catholics off from any share in the school money, whereas it would give them practical control of the schools, as we shall show later on.—*BEA 8.2*

We will now consider the amendment adopted, and Congress ready to enforce it by proper legislation. It finds a score of denominations, each strenuous to have its own peculiar views taught in the public schools, if any are to be taught. But this will not do; only those can be taught which are common to all-upon which all can agree. It is manifest, therefore, that the churches themselves are the only ones who could determine this. They only can tell the principles upon which they can all agree. Congress cannot decide this point, nor would the churches allow it to if it could, for they have already expressed themselves on the matter. In the *Christian Statesman* of February 21, 1884, Rev. J. C. K. Milligan said in regard to theological questions:—*BEA 9.1*

“The churches must settle [pages missing]—*BEA 9.2*

...been decided by vote of a council what the principles of the Christian religion are, that, as already shown, would not change anybody’s mind, and every teacher of the Bible would give his teaching the bias of his own conception of truth. It could not be otherwise.—*BEA 16.1*

4. To obviate this it is evident that, the principles of the Christian religion having been settled by the council of the churches, the State would have to embody them in a text-book, which all would be required to use. Mr. Blair has already seen the necessity for this, and has planned for it, as appears from the following extract from a letter which he wrote to the secretary of the National Reform Association:—*BEA 16.2*

“I believe that a text-book of instruction in the principles of virtue, morality, and of the Christian religion, can be proposed for use in the public schools by the join effort of those who represent every branch of the Christian church, both Protestant and Catholic.”—*BEA*

But what would this result in? Just this: First, in giving the Catholic Church the controlling voice in determining what religious instruction should be given in the public schools, so that very many, if not the majority, of the public schools would virtually be only Roman Catholic schools. Second, it would necessarily result in withholding the Bible from the people. For even though the principles laid down in the text-book or catechisms were in harmony with the Bible, it would not do to let the teachers have free access to the Bible, or else they would be imbibing doctrines that would be heretical, according to the religion of the State, and would be teaching them to the children. Within four hundred years men have been burned at the stake for doing just such things as that, and punishment of some kind would certainly follow in this country.*BEA*

It is evident, also, that the only way that uniformity could be secured would be by forbidding the reading of the Bible in private, or even the possession of it. Children who were allowed access to the bible would get hold of some of these things that are not common to all branches of the church, and would be setting up their opinions against that of their teachers. No, not against the opinion of their teachers, for they would not be allowed to have any, but against the opinions of the text-book. It needs but a moment's thought to enable one to see that all the benefits of the proposed amendment would be lost if the people were allowed to read the Bible for themselves. When the State undertakes to define and teach the principles of the Christian religion, it must do the work thoroughly, and must not suffer its authority to be questioned. The Bible therefore will have to be proscribed.*BEA 17.1*

So we see that from whatever side we approach this amendment, it provides only for a union of Church and State, and that union on the Catholic model. Heresy will be rebellion against the State, and any thought of the Bible, different from the standard text-book, will be heresy. We have not indulged in any fanciful speculation. History repeats itself, because human nature is ever the same. The causes which led to the prohibiting of the Bible in the Middle Ages, will do the same thing now. As then, so now, the State church will be the

censor of men's conscientious convictions, and the liberty of a man to think for himself will be taken away.*BEA 17.2*

One other point in Senator Blair's remarks should be noticed. That is, that it is of the greatest importance that a child should possess a knowledge of the principles of the Christian religion, even if he does not apply those principles in his personal conduct. We most heartily dissent. We don't believe that the knowledge which Judas had of the principles of the Christian religion, and he must have had an intimate knowledge of them, made his traitorous act one whit better. The principles of the Christian religion are of no account whatever unless they are applied to the personal conduct. Indeed, they are worse than useless if not applied to the personal conduct, since they make the individual satisfied with a mere form of religion. And so again we charge this amendment with providing for a State religion which will be utterly destitute of the power of vital godliness, and of planning the education of children in this form, so that they will become conceited formalists, sunk in carnal security.*BEA 17.3*

If anybody says that there is no danger that the amendment will ever be adopted, we warn him against indulging in any such delusion. The National Reform Association is to a man in favor of it. The *Christian Statesman* of July 19, 1888, said:—*BEA 18.1*

"Senator Blair's proposed amendment furnishes an admirable opportunity for making the ideas of the National Reform Association familiar to the minds of the people."*BEA 18.2*

In the *Christian Statesman* of September 6, 1888, Mr. John Alexander, the father and first president of the National Reform Association, congratulated the association on the introduction of the Blair amendment, and said: "The National Reform Association ought to spare no pains and omit no effort which may promise to secure its adoption." And in the issue of December 27, 1888, the same paper spoke most enthusiastically of both of Mr. Blair's religious bills, and said: "Both of these measures involve the principle of National Christianity," thus showing that we are not taking a partisan view when we say that its adoption will make the union of Church and State.*BEA 18.3*

As further showing that the proposed amendment is all that the

National Reformers desire, we quote the words of Rev. J. C. K. Milligan, a leading member of the National Reform Association, in a communication to the *Christian Statesman* of July 26, 1888:—*BEA 19.1*

“Your editorial of July 12, on a Christian constitutional amendment pending in the Senate, is most gratifying news to every Christian patriot. It seems too good to be true. It is too good to prevail without a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether on the part of its friends; but it is so good that it surely will have many friends who will put forth the necessary efforts. True, the pending amendment has its chief value in one phrase, ‘the Christian religion;’ but if it shall pass into our fundamental law, that one phrase will have all the potency of Almighty God, of Christ the Lord, of the Holy Bible, and of all the Christian world, with it. By letters to senators and representatives in Congress, by petitions numerous signed and forwarded to them, by local, State, and national conventions held, and public meetings in every school district, such an influence can quickly be brought to bear as will compel our legislators to adopt the measure, and enforce it by the needed legislation. The Christian pulpits, if they would, could secure its adoption before the dog-days end. The National Reform Association, the *Christian Statesman*, and the secretaries in the field, are charged with this work, and will not be wanting as leaders in the cause.”*BEA 19.2*

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